Tome beats reference programs

Computers have many time and space-saving advantages. But in one case an old-fashioned reference book beats two new computer programs.

The programs are Writer's Handbook, which costs $39.95, and the Associated Press Stylebook for $59.95. Each one is a disk version of a reference book. Both are produced by Digital Learning Systems of Parsippany, N.J.

The book is the "U.S. News and World Report Stylebook for Writers and Editors." It's available by mail from U.S. News and World Report for $7.95.

So how does one book beat two programs?:

■ The book is much easier to use than either program. Both programs are memory-resident and can pop up at any time while you're writing. In theory each should work as easily as a computerized speller or thesaurus by letting you look up grammar questions, check unusual spellings and, with the Associated Press Handbook, check obscure facts.

The idea is a good one, and the

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execution is simple and slick. But you have to go through two, sometimes three levels of menus to get to the entry you want, which isn't as easy as scanning a table of contents.

And when you do find the entry you want, it appears on the screen over your word processing document. If you have anything less than a photographic memory, you may wind up writing down what the programmed reference is telling you, so that you can use it without looking it up again.

■ The book is much more resourceful. In fact, I found information in Writer's Handbook too simplistic to even be useful. The capitalization rules merely tell you that only the major words in a title should be capitalized. The lists of abbreviations and foreign phrases

are more robust than the grammar rules, but you still have to scroll all the way through them to find what you're looking for.

The Associated Press Stylebook program contains more detailed information, which makes it even more cumbersome to use.

The reference material is drawn from that bible of the newspaper industry, the book form of "The Associated Press Stylebook." I found it less than complete when it comes to questions about grammar and facts.

From my experience, using either of these two programs will take you more time than using a reference book, cause you more frustration and certainly cost you more money.

For spell-checking and synonym-finding, however, nothing beats the speller and thesaurus combination included with the WordPerfect program.

For questions about grammar and writing style, there's still nothing more useful than the tried-and-true "Elements of Style" by William Strunk and E.B. White. This

slim volume is widely available and costs only $3.95.

But the most useful and best value in reference for writers is the U.S. News and World Report stylebook.

The book is nicely laid out and it's information is detailed and complete. The topics run from notes on Russian names to lists of all the world's currencies, a discussion of trademarks, and detailed grammar lessons. A table of contents and an index ensure that you'll find what you're looking for.

The bottom line: Forget the computer versions of reference works for writers — they're much more hassle and less value than the original books. If you have room for only one reference book, get the one from the U.S. News and World Report.

Hillel Segal's column has been broadened to include evaluations of gadgets, seminars and books designed to enhance business productivity. Segal is a management consultant based in Boulder.